Transportation External Coordination Working Group
Communications Topic Group
Best Practices for DOE[1]
Radioactive Materials Transportation Public Information and Participation

Introduction

From 1998 to 2000, several U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) programs successfully completed hundreds of radioactive materials shipments. Examples include shipping campaigns involving spent nuclear fuel, transuranic waste, tritium-producing reactor components, low-level radioactive waste, and mixed oxide (MOX) fuel. Each of these DOE programs took a different approach to working with the public, media, and agency and elected officials who were interested in or affected by the shipments. Some chose to inform them early and often, and one chose to ignore them. Some defined stakeholder "involvement" in terms of providing information to the public, whereas others actively sought input into routing and other decisions. The different attitudes toward and approaches to communicating with stakeholders produced different reactions to the shipments.

This paper identifies the best practices gleaned from these shipping campaigns. Just as DOE looks to previous experiences to guide decisions of a technical nature, the Department may also learn from the institutional lessons of previous campaigns.

Transportation Challenges

DOE is able to draw on 50-plus years of experience in shipping radioactive materials in the United States, clearing most technical hurdles: designing and procuring new shipping containers, matching shipping sites with receiver sites, contracting with carriers, and safely moving materials from Point A to Point B. Although these activities are certainly not uncomplicated, approaching them and accomplishing them are relatively straightforward tasks.

The "institutional" or organizational side of transportation presents the real challenge, because institutions — and the people that comprise them — are varied and may be unpredictable. States and tribes, for example, can vary widely in their approach to planning and preparing for radioactive materials shipments. Even within a state or a tribal government, different agencies might react differently to the same shipping campaign. Spreading out further to the affected counties, cities, and towns — to the citizens themselves — DOE potentially faces myriad reactions to its radioactive materials shipments.

Best Practices

[1] This document is intended to assist DOE program managers in their efforts to communicate about radioactive materials transportation in a manner that is responsive to the needs and concerns of stakeholders. The Communications Topic Group of the U.S. Department of Energy's Transportation External Coordination Working Group (TEC) prepared this document. The TEC was formed in 1992 to improve coordination between DOE and external groups interested in the Department's transportation activities. The membership of the TEC includes representatives of national, state, tribal, and local government organizations, labor, industry, and professional groups.

One of the most important steps is to determine how much information to disseminate, to whom, and when. Programs can safely assume that at least some stakeholders along a shipping route will be interested in even a *single* radioactive materials shipment. While it might be tempting to "let sleeping dogs lie" — especially in the case of just one or two shipments — the consequences of having someone else *wake* the dog (i.e., shipment information acknowledged or released only after it is discovered) may adversely impact DOE's credibility and efforts to be more forthcoming with information.[2] On the other hand, blanketing communities along a route with reams of information could wind up creating confusion, at best, or opposition, at worst.

A good approach is to begin by reaching out to the states and tribes along the probable shipping routes. The goals could be to seek input on the extent to which the various affected governments and the public would be interested in the shipments, and to identify points of contact at the state, tribal, and local levels.

Depending on the need for training along the route, this initial contact could occur one to two years prior to the start of shipments. Through the regional cooperative-agreement groups,[3] DOE's National Transportation Program (NTP) maintains a listing of state representatives appointed by the governors to address radioactive materials shipment planning with each other and with DOE. DOE's Office of Intergovernmental and Public Accountability maintains a listing of tribal points of contact.

NTP has numerous resources available to other DOE programs that are gearing up to ship radioactive materials, so starting entirely from scratch when preparing a public outreach program isn't necessary. Among these resources are booklets and fact sheets on various radioactive materials transportation subjects, "quick facts" on commonly used containers, model key messages, and sample language explaining the risks associated with transporting radioactive materials. NTP also maintains a collection of transportation plans (including communications plans) from the Department's previous shipping campaigns. Many of these information products were developed in consultation with and reviewed by DOE stakeholders through the TEC (see footnote 1). DOE programs could make use of these items, supplementing or modifying them as necessary to incorporate information specific to their own shipments.

Websites are good tools for making information available. To increase exposure, program- or shipment-specific sites could be linked to the NTP site and others pertaining to radioactive materials transportation. References to websites can provide an exact URL address to a page with information pertaining to the subject. For example, directing the reader to the exact URL address of the Department's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant website for additional information on

[2] The 1999 MOX fuel shipment is an example of how even a single shipment can become controversial when the approach to public communication is "No comment."
[3] The four regional groups are the Council of State Governments' Midwestern Office and Eastern Regional Conference, the Southern States Energy Board, and the Western Governors' Association.

transuranic waste shipments would be much more helpful than providing DOE home page website address.

Regardless of how little interest there appears to be in an upcoming shipping campaign, DOE shippers should be prepared to give out *some* information. As noted earlier, shippers may consider preparing a fact sheet with general information on a particular shipping activity — the number of shipments, mode, possible route(s), broad timeframe (e.g., "summer of 2001"), quantity and type of material being shipped, and the reason for making the shipment (e.g., tied to environmental cleanup). In addition, fact sheets could provide stakeholders with a list of references for obtaining further information. One of those references may be a single point of contact within the Department, along with a telephone number.

The fact sheets produced by NTP provide a good example of a suitable format and level of detail for presenting this general information. States have traditionally used such concise, general fact sheets to inform emergency responders, state legislators, tribal officials, local leaders, and the news media regarding upcoming shipments. A good rule of thumb in preparing campaign-specific fact sheets is "the shorter, the better." In many cases, long, detailed publications will be less useful to states and tribes that are conducting training or simply trying to inform residents or government officials along the routes. In the absence of DOE fact sheets and other brief informational materials, the states, tribes, and local governments may write and distribute their own materials.

DOE program managers may consider obtaining input from state and tribal officials and other stakeholders on at least one draft version of the public communications materials and other transportation planning documents that their programs produce. DOE can encourage state, tribal, and local officials to share any public information materials they produce regarding upcoming shipments.

All information should be as accurate as possible — any uncertainties (e.g., in schedule or number of shipments) should be made clear. Programs can carefully consider disseminating quantitative information that may not be useful to the lay reader. The number of bolts in a cask lid or the color of the container, for example, may convey little *meaningful* information to the average non-scientist, as would curie content and dose rates. When appropriate, any additional, potential dose rates resulting from a shipping campaign would be simply explained in context with naturally occurring background radiation. The Departmental point of contact for the shipments would be prepared to answer questions about these factors and others. States and tribes, in particular, will want detailed information on the containers and the material in connection with training or inspection activities.

For long-term shipping campaigns, one successful outreach activity is a "show and tell" or "road show" involving the shipping casks. For both cesium and WIPP shipments, for example, a truck and cask stopped in five or six communities along the shipping route in Oregon, for about 30-40 minutes each. Emergency responders, local elected officials, and the news media were invited to view the cask and talk to the drivers and the accompanying state and DOE staff about the

shipping campaign. For the most part, these stops were very well received. Other long-term programs may want to consider such proven opportunities for public outreach.

Those familiar with DOE are aware that contractor staff perform many of DOE's shipping-related activities under direction from DOE. Many people outside of DOE are not aware of this arrangement. Contractors cannot speak for DOE or establish DOE policy, and there may be a perception that contractors are not "accountable" in the same manner that DOE employees are. For these reasons, it is appropriate for stakeholders to hear information directly from the DOE employee, with the contractor in a supporting role. In other words, a DOE employee is more fitting to handle all primary public information activities. At meetings with stakeholders — whether state and tribal inspectors, elected officials, or the general public — DOE staff should take center stage.

Once all the states and tribal points of contact have been identified, the DOE public information officer can create an electronic distribution list for disseminating information regarding media and public information requests. The people who work with DOE to plan the shipments will want to know whether there is media interest in other states — it will help them to be prepared for such developments in their own jurisdictions. DOE could share any news articles or television/radio transcripts that result from information requests from the media. In distributing this information, basic facts could be supplied by the public information officer — who called, what was discussed, when the story will run — without offering any commentary.

The media have a tendency to pick up on bad news and usually only cover good news if they are made aware of it (a slow news day helps, too). Although the safe arrival of a radioactive materials shipment at its destination might not be considered "news," there are media outlets that will cover such a story. Assuming the shipment was conducted with input from the affected states and tribes, DOE could publicize its successful shipping activities with press releases (see Appendix B for an example). Doing so may gradually lead to a more positive perception of radioactive materials transportation.

Institutional activities present an ongoing challenge to DOE's radioactive materials shipping campaigns. To meet this challenge, DOE shippers may want to take a lesson from the experiences of previous shipping campaigns. Programs are likely to be successful if they:

(1) properly identify the scope, or level of interest in the campaign or shipping schedule, enlisting the assistance of state, tribal, and regional points of contact at the start and throughout the campaign;
(2) make use of existing resources;
(3) provide accurate information written for the target audience;
(4) are managed directly by the DOE program or public information officers themselves
(5) freely share information with other agencies and organizations that are helping to plan the shipments and
(6) consider a post-shipment press-release.

This document draws from the lessons learned from the following shipping campaigns:

DOE Program	Material	Dates	Origin	Destination
Spent Fuel Program	Spent nuclear fuel from foreign research reactors	Ongoing (began in August 1999)	Savannah River Site (SC)	Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (ID)
Tritium-Production Program	Tritium-producing burnable absorber rods	June-September 1999	Oak Ridge (TN)	INEEL (ID)
Waste Isolation Pilot Plant Program	Transuranic Waste	Ongoing (began in March 1999)	Various sites	Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (NM)
Materials Disposition	Mixed oxide fuel	December 1999	Los Alamos (NM)	Chalk River (Canada)

For more information:

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

More than 300 highly radioactive cesium-137 capsules have been safely returned to the Hanford Site in southwest Washington almost a year ahead of schedule. The 309 capsules were trucked from a commercial facility in Colorado, where they were used to sterilize medical equipment. Cesium-137 is a radioactive isotope of the element cesium.

In the early-to-mid 1980s, the U.S. Department of Energy (USDOE) leased about 770 cesium capsules from Hanford to commercial irradiation facilities in four states (Colorado, Georgia, Ohio and Virginia). The cesium was extracted from Hanford's high-level radioactive waste tanks. After one capsule in Georgia was found to have a small leak, USDOE began to ship the capsules back to Hanford, where they are safely stored under water.

The first of 20 shipments from Colorado was made last May. The final shipment arrived at Hanford this afternoon. USDOE originally expected to take nearly two years to complete the shipments. However, loading and unloading the capsules took less time than expected, allowing the shipments to be completed well ahead of schedule. Shipments traveled through four Eastern Oregon counties (Malheur, Baker, Union and Umatilla) and across the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Working through the Western Governors' Association, the states along the shipping corridor, the Umatilla Indian Tribe and USDOE developed a transportation safety plan for the shipments. The plan gave the states and Tribe unprecedented authority to regulate the shipments.

(more)

Shipments were not dispatched if road or weather conditions along the route were unacceptable to the states, even if other hazardous material shipments were not restricted. During the past winter, the states and Tribe used this authority to delay several shipments until weather or road conditions improved.

Each shipment also underwent a rigorous inspection prior to departure and had up to three additional inspections while en route. The inspection standards for these shipments were higher than for any other hazardous material shipment. At the request of the states and Tribe, USDOE also developed a training course for local emergency responders specifically for these shipments. This course supplemented training already provided by the states.

"We're pleased that the federal government agreed to special safety procedures for these shipments," said Mary Lou Blazek, manager of the Oregon Department of Energy's Nuclear Waste Program. "The eventual cleanup at Hanford will likely involve extensive transport of radioactive waste through Oregon. The safety plan for the cesium shipments helps establish the type of precautions we expect for future high-activity shipments."

Between 1989 and 1991, about 440 of the cesium capsules were returned to Hanford without incident. With the return of the 309 capsules from Colorado, only 25 in Virginia remain to be returned to Hanford. Those capsules will go to Hanford in two truck shipments, possibly next spring.

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